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ABSTRACT

This briefing paper presents research on the importance of storytelling in human experience and explores the relevance of storytelling as an instructional tool in Pacific classrooms. The paper provides teachers with suggestions for getting started with storytelling in the classroom, such as: (1) introduce units about geography and people of the world by telling interesting stories from those cultures; (2) decide ahead of time how to use gestures, props, voices, and other devices that will make the story come alive; (3) describe sensory experiences, and lead children into inquiry; (4) stimulate children's imaginations by encouraging them to participate in storytelling and listening; (5) encourage use of metaphors as a way of finding similarities between objects; and (6) maintain eye contact with the audience, pause at the story's end, and provide opportunities for children to listen and tell stories in class. The paper also offers recommendations for how to use storytelling, including using a range of stories to help meet the linguistic, social, and academic needs of an increasingly culturally diverse student population; exploring storytelling as a way for students to learn and develop an understanding of themselves and others; and developing students' reading and writing skills by building upon the ability to orally articulate personal experiences. Contains 8 references. (NKA)

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Storytelling: The Heart and Soul of Education

By Stan Koki*

The cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the Pacific region gives Pacific educators an excellent opportunity to enrich children's learning. Diverse points of view, personal histories, prior experiences, and learning styles can be used to greatly enhance teaching and learning. The professional literature suggests numerous ways for teachers to design instruction so that all children learn. Storytelling is one way—it costs nothing, is enjoyable, and can be used anywhere and at any time (Zabel, 1991).

All people have a basic need to share stories. Stories organize experiences and record important happenings. As common forms of discourse, stories are of great interest and significance in language and literacy development, especially when considering the increased linguistic and cultural diversity of students in Pacific classrooms. Stories enable teachers to learn about their students' cultures, experiences, and meaningful relationships. Through the sharing of stories, teachers and children "create the potential for new connections that link them together inside a new tale" (Dyson & Genishi, 1994).

This briefing paper presents research on the importance of storytelling in human experience, and explores the relevance of storytelling as an instructional tool in Pacific classrooms.

Why Are Stories Told?

Stories first arise in the context of relationships when small children acquire the ability to verbalize their experiences. With this verbalization, children become the "narrated selves" of their own lives, sharing interpretations with others. Like adults, children use narrative to shape and reshape their lives, imagining what could have or should have happened, and reviewing what actually did happen (Stern, 1985). Thus stories have interrelated social and evaluative functions (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). The stories we tell help define our socio-cultural landscape in particular ways and demonstrate connections between language, culture, and power (Dakhtin, 1981).

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Storytelling is as old as mankind, predating any other form of oral history (Zabel, 1991). Joseph Campbell believes that stories in the form of myths represent "a cacophonous chorus" that began when our primal ancestors told stories about the animals they killed for food and the supernatural world to which they thought the animals departed after death. People tell stories in an attempt to come to terms with the world and harmonize their lives with reality (Flowers, 1988).

Stories have been used since time immemorial to record important events, celebrate the feats of heroes and heroines, transmit the spirit and facts of a major occurrence, and point out patterns of human experience and behavior. Storytelling is a cornerstone of the teaching profession (Zabel, 1991).

Researchers have noted the significance of storytelling in oral cultures that have persisted over time. Stories help tribe members to make sense of their collective experiences, such as illness, death, and conflict, as well as interrelationships, including courtship, marriage, childbirth, and stewardship of nature. An oral culture teaches tribe members to preserve the wisdom of their heritage, transmit skills, maintain respect for elders, and understand how children fit into their lives (Van Groenou, 1995).

Because they rely so much on words, stories offer a tremendous source of language experience for children. Stories are motivating, easily accessible, and immensely interesting. "Surely, stories should be a central part of the world of primary teachers whether they are teaching the mother tongue or a foreign language" (Wright, 1995).

Storytelling in the Classroom

It is important for children to make up stories, just as it is important for them to hear and respond to stories told by other people. When children create and tell a story in their own or a second language, the language becomes theirs (Wright, 1995). Oral language is an important tool for the cognitive growth of young children (Van Groenou, 1995).

With the increased use of the whole language approach to reading and writing, storytelling has taken on an important role. Students with experience in hearing and telling stories such as myths, legends, and folklore are eager to begin creating or writing their own stories. Critical thinking skills, vocabulary, and language patterns are enhanced through use of stories (Zabel, 1991).

Using stories in the classroom results in enhanced cultural awareness through the glimpses that stories afford into other people's worldview. Because stories have been handed down through time, they are "examples of the heart and soul of the people who created them. They are treasured reminders of how life used to be (in both good and bad times), and how they show non-members of that culture some of the thinking strategies and beliefs that have made different groups what they are today" (Zabel, 1991).

Research clearly suggests that teachers must encourage and enrich oral development in young children. Egan (1993) states:

> Oral and literate are not opposites; rather, the development of orality is the necessary foundation for the later development of literacy....Indeed, a sensitive program of instruction will use the child's oral cultural capacities to make reading and writing engaging and meaningful. (pp. 37-38)

When presenting stories to children, teachers should keep the following premises in mind:

- The affective domain—the world of feelings and emotions—is relevant in education; children experience the world as a whole; words are not separate from life experience.
- Narration of personal experience makes lessons more captivating and meaningful.
- Stimulation of the imagination assists development of metaphoric fluency.
- A teacher's enjoyment of language resonates with children (Van Groenou, 1995).

Getting Started

Using storytelling in the classroom may be somewhat intimidating to teachers initially, so it may be practical, at first, for a teacher to use a story that is personally appealing. Identifying how the story is to be used is a critical first step; then, the appropriate type of story can be chosen. Here are a few suggestions that can help incorporate storytelling into a language curriculum:

1. Introduce units about geography and people of the world by telling interesting stories from those cultures.
2. Decide ahead of time how to use gestures, props, voices, and other devices that will make the story come alive for children.
3. Describe different sensory experiences, and lead children into inquiry with the teacher.
4. Stimulate children's imagination by encouraging them to participate in storytelling and listening.
5. Encourage use of metaphors as a way of finding similarities between objects.
6. Maintain eye contact with the audience, pause at the end of the story, and provide lots of opportunities for children to listen and tell stories in class (Van Groenou, 1995; Zabel, 1991).

We all need stories in our daily lives. Stories are particularly important to children because they help children understand their world and share it with others. "Children's hunger for stories is constant. Every time they enter your classroom, they enter with a need for stories" (Wright, 1995).

Recommendations

1. Listen with sensitivity to students' stories, and design instruction around those stories to allow students' diverse experiences to become meaningful for the students presenting stories as well as for listeners.
2. Use a range of stories to help meet the linguistic, social, and academic needs of an increasingly culturally-diverse student population.
3. Explore storytelling as a way for students to learn and develop an understanding of themselves and others through their life stories.
4. Develop students' reading and writing skills by building upon the ability to orally articulate personal experiences.

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